

Enolia McMillan; First Woman to Lead NAACP

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Enolia P. McMillan, 102, a Baltimore educator who became an influential figure in the NAACP and the first female president of the civil rights organization, died Oct. 24 at her home in Stevenson, in Baltimore County. She had congestive heart failure.

Mrs. McMillan, whose father was born into slavery, received a master's degree in education and became a teacher and administrator, initially in segregated schools. This helped guide her NAACP activism in the 1930s, and in time, she was considered the matriarch of the Baltimore branch.

She also served as president of the Maryland State Colored Teachers' Association and was credited with bringing better-quality books to black students and better pay for black teachers.

She said that many in the school system pegged her as a troublemaker. "They put me down as a smart aleck, but that's the only way you get attention," she later said of the administrators who hired her.

She was president of the Baltimore NAACP in the 1970s and 1980s, which overlapped with her service as national president from 1984 to 1990. The national presidency at that time was a ceremonial position, but Mrs. McMillan became a leading figure in the organization's most important discussions and internal debates.

In 1983, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People shifted its longtime headquarters to Brooklyn from Manhattan after a significant rent increase. Three years later, Mrs. McMillan helped to orchestrate the group's move to Baltimore after the city offered financial incentives. (There are now plans to transfer NAACP headquarters to Washington.)

As national president, Mrs. McMillan spoke out about Reagan administration policies that she said harmed the NAACP's advocacy efforts in housing, education, employment and business.

The organization suffered large deficits and a decrease in membership, which worsened with a leadership crisis in the 1990s and what some members called a lack of direction after the victories of the civil rights era.

Mrs. McMillan was critical of the NAACP's executive director, Benjamin F. Chavis Jr., and board chairman, William F. Gibson, both of whom left the organization in the early 1990s under accusations of financial misdeeds.



BY RIC FELD — ASSOCIATED PRESS

Enolia P. McMillan is applauded by NAACP Chairman Julian Bond at the organization's annual convention in 1998.

Mrs. McMillan led the no-confidence vote against Gibson at an NAACP annual board meeting in 1995 that ushered in his successor, Myrlie Evers-Williams, widow of slain civil rights icon Medgar Evers. Evers-Williams won by a single vote.

To address the NAACP's financial difficulties, Mrs. McMillan was known for demanding that everyone in her path buy a white button for \$1 that read in blue letters, "I gave NAACP." This effort was credited with raising \$30,000.

Julian Bond, current NAACP chairman, said yesterday: "Here's this woman who you would otherwise think would be tending to her knitting, who had been a lifetime civil rights activist, and when the organization she spent her life working for was in crisis, she jumped to make sure it was salvaged. For many people, she became the public face of the NAACP."

Enolia Virginia Pettigen was born Oct. 20, 1904, in Willow Grove, Pa. Her father, a vegetable planter, moved the family to Baltimore, where he became the food grower for what is now Morgan State University, a historically black school.

Her mother, a domestic worker, "taught us to do what is right and to work hard for what you get," she told the Baltimore Sun of her upbringing with three siblings. "I had

to work hard. Nobody ever gave me anything. I wasn't pretty, I wasn't cute."

She added: "In my third year of high school, a classmate told me, 'If you aren't in with the teacher, she won't pass you.' I said, 'I'm not going to get in with her, and she'll pass me.' And she did: She gave me 75s while others got 95s. My mother asked her what my weakness was. Do you know what she said? 'She's not using enough commas.'"

Mrs. McMillan commuted from Baltimore to attend Howard University on an Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority scholarship. After graduating in 1926, she became a principal in rural Charles County's only black high school.

"We were stuck at one end of the county, with no transportation at all," she told the Sun. "The colored teachers' association bought a second-hand bus that broke down every other day. Then we bought a new bus and charged the children \$1 a week and raised money with affairs at school. Then we bought another bus. When I left there after eight years, we had built up the school population, and I was just really tired."

Mrs. McMillan went on to receive her master's degree in education from Columbia University in 1933 and wrote a thesis deeply critical of racially segregated secondary education in Maryland.

She taught at junior high schools

in Baltimore and became one of the first black teachers assigned to a white school in 1954, after the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation in public schools. She retired in 1969 as vice principal of Baltimore's Dunbar High School.

The next year, she became president of the Baltimore NAACP and made the hiring of black businesses for local, state and federal contracts a priority. She also helped to organize a picket threat in 1982 against the Baltimore Hilton, where an off-duty city police officer was to perform a blackface routine honoring Al Jolson. The show was canceled.

In 1975, Mrs. McMillan was named the first female chairman of the board of regents at Morgan State.

She criticized younger generations of blacks, whom she saw as beneficiaries of the NAACP's fight for voting rights, for not going to the polls to influence elections. She also didn't think that racism would vanish, she told the Sun.

"You'll very often find even down at the bottom there's a power struggle, and the person in power — the race in power — has the advantage," she said.

Her husband, Betha D. McMillan Sr., a restaurateur whom she married in 1936, died in 1985.

Survivors include a son, Betha D. McMillan Jr. of Stevenson, and four grandchildren.